



# Community College Strategies

## *Developments in Community College Accountability: California*

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Accountability efforts at California's community colleges gained prominence in the 1990s under an agreement known as Partnership for Excellence (PFE) that involved the chancellor's office, the legislature, and the governor's office. This agreement was the first wide-ranging accountability effort undertaken by the state's community college system; before that, there had been no comprehensive statewide data system for measuring institutional performance. PFE produced additional funding for the state's community colleges, but it hardly satisfied the executive branch's interest in accountability.

PFE compared actual volumes of specific outputs to a set of adjusted outputs to see whether the system as a whole had met reasonable levels of performance. Under PFE, levels of expected performance were adjusted for expected funding. But because the system always received less than the full level of expected funding, the expected performance levels were perennially adjusted downward (and subsequently, actual performance was lowered in turn). Furthermore, PFE could not identify underperforming colleges because it emphasized the performance of all 109 colleges as a group. Consequently, PFE eventually lost favor with oversight representatives from the governor's office and the state legislature.

In 2004, the legislature and the governor's office approved Assembly Bill 1417 (AB 1417). AB 1417 required the chancellor's office, with the assistance

of external consultants, to propose a performance reporting system. The chancellor's office selected Trudy Bers, Joseph Burke, Peter Ewell, Andrew Gill, and Jim Jacobs as its consultants. With the help of these experts on community college performance, the chancellor's office satisfied AB 1417 by submitting a comprehensive plan for performance measurement that focused on the performance of individual colleges on a set of six basic performance indicators. In 2006, the chancellor's office implemented the proposal that emanated from AB 1417. The implementation of AB 1417 became the system known as Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC). For additional detail, see [www.cccco.edu/systemoffice/divisions/techresearchinfo/researchandplanning/ARCC.tabid/292/default.aspx](http://www.cccco.edu/systemoffice/divisions/techresearchinfo/researchandplanning/ARCC.tabid/292/default.aspx). As part of the implementation plan, the

forming colleges and Sacramento-based investigation of those colleges. Instead, the strategy of local accountability assumes that the local board of trustees for each college will act to improve its community college's performance if it has the proper data with which to evaluate that performance. ARCC requires each local board of trustees to have a dialogue with its college officials on the topic of the ARCC results. Each college must submit documentation of this interaction to the chancellor's office within one year of the release of the official report.

### **Methodological Features**

The performance measures in ARCC include (1) rates of completion for associate degree, transfer, or certificate; (2) rates of completion of at least thirty units; (3) rates of term-to-term persistence; (4) rates of completion for voca-

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chancellor's office convened meetings with the colleges and created a Web site to help the colleges fulfill the requirements of ARCC. In March 2007, the chancellor's office submitted the official ARCC report to the legislature.

The ARCC strategy relies on "local accountability" to promote progress in institutional performance. This approach avoids withholding funds from underper-

forming colleges; (5) rates of completion for basic skills courses; (6) number and percentage of public institution baccalaureate recipients who transferred from a California community college; (7) annual number of transfers to any four-year institution; (8) transfer rate to four-year institutions; (9) number of degrees or certificates awarded per program; (10) increase in total personal

income following completion of a vocational degree or certificate; (11) number of people with improvement in basic skills; and (12) ethnicity-specific rates of participation in the community colleges. Results for items 6 through 12 were aggregated only at the state level, not for individual colleges.

The format of the performance data has four notable facets. First, the ARCC report for each college includes the three most recent years of data available for each indicator. Thus, each college has its own past as a baseline for

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determining how well it has done on an indicator; a trustee or other stakeholder can make a judgment without comparing the performances of different colleges. A college's performance on one indicator over multiple time periods may have more meaning to trustees than a college's performance in a single time period.

Second, for items 1 through 5, the ARCC report for each college compares the college's performance on a specific performance indicator with the performance of other peer colleges on that same indicator. ARCC provides statistically determined peer groups for each indicator. That is, each college has a specific, possibly unique peer group for each performance indicator. The indicator-specific peer grouping matches the assumption that community colleges strive to achieve multiple missions. Placing a college in a single peer group for all the different indicators would assume that there are no differences among the missions and environments of the various colleges.

The statistical determination of each peer group is a three-stage process. In stage one, researchers at the chancellor's office combine information from literature reviews and input from institutional researchers at the colleges to identify environmental variables that theoretically could affect a specific performance indicator. In stage two, chancellor's office researchers use regression modeling to find the most parsimonious set of variables that predict a specific performance indicator. In stage three, chancellor's office researchers

use cluster analysis with the parsimonious set of environmental variables to identify comparison colleges for a given performance indicator.

Third, ARCC includes a brief analysis from each college. Following receipt of draft tables for ARCC performance indicators, each college has the opportunity to include in the ARCC report information about its own unique situation. These brief college self-assessments add context to the numerical data that the chancellor's office publishes in the report. The self-assessments help to account for unique, unsystematic, and uncontrollable events such as natural disasters, civil disturbances, or new state laws that can affect an institution's performance on an indicator.

ARCC presents a fourth type of data: enrollment statistics. These data function as a local measure of a college's performance by indicating the size and diversity of its served population. Enrollment statistics also provide context for the equitable interpretation of a college's performance on the indica-

tors and of a college's position in a peer group.

### Reaction of Stakeholders and Others

In general, the community colleges accepted ARCC as an accountability mechanism. Some colleges had trouble accepting ARCC because they viewed the results as underestimates of their performance. Many community college administrators took note of the peer group results. ARCC's statistically based peer groups often differed from the perceptions of administrators about which institutions were their peers. Many college administrators viewed the ARCC peer grouping as a black box. A few institutional researchers at the community colleges have proposed alternative methods for specific calculations in ARCC, but it will take some time for the chancellor's office to evaluate the feasibility of each proposal. Nevertheless, many institutional researchers considered ARCC a major advance in community college analysis, and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges recognized this accomplishment at its 2008 conference by bestowing two of its annual awards on the ARCC project.

The oversight bodies (the Department of Finance and the legislative analyst's office) felt that the 2007 ARCC report met their expectations. The news media gave the report reasonable coverage following the press conference that the chancellor's office held to announce its release. The articles generally had a neutral tone. A number of researchers with no ties to the community colleges or the chancellor's office have provided fairly positive assessments of the 2007 ARCC report. According to some media reports, researchers for an earlier analysis of California's community colleges did question specific points in

the 2007 ARCC report, so there were a few critics of the ARCC in the research community. Finally, there was some interest in creating tables in the ARCC report to show how well historically underrepresented populations fared.

### Latest Developments

The chancellor's office completed the 2008 ARCC report in March 2008. This report showed numerous changes from the data for the performance indicators contained in the 2007 report. The 2008 report incorporated the effects of a recent campaign to improve the quality of college-reported data, especially data related to English as a Second Language, basic skills, and noncredit courses. Using the improved data, the chancellor's office completed a new cycle of its peer grouping process (the regression modeling and the cluster analysis) and added a new year of data to the 2008 report. The 2008 ARCC report uses the same type of wage match data to measure post-certification changes in wages for technical education students that appeared in the 2007 ARCC report. For the 2008 ARCC report, the chancellor's office could not obtain an agreement with the California Employment Development Department (EDD) to perform a new data match. However, recent legislation now requires EDD to work with the chancellor's office to complete the data match for longitudinal wage data.

### Future Developments

The chancellor's office has begun work on the 2009 ARCC report. Studies that go beyond the ARCC legislation will probably begin to use many of the data and findings that appeared in the 2007 ARCC report. The service area index, a custom variable developed by researchers in the chancellor's office, will gain additional use in other stud-

ies that need to include some measure of student socioeconomic background. Statewide studies that aim to discover effective practices may use the peer groupings to facilitate field studies that focus on distinguishing practices or institutions within a peer group, thus controlling for environmental contexts. A number of colleges will begin to undertake local studies in response to the performance information in the ARCC reports. To facilitate such local analyses for improvement, the chancellor's office has developed an ARCC data portal that on-campus institutional researchers can access for local analyses. Whether a study occurs through local efforts or state efforts, ARCC will help to further the development of causal models for specific performance indicators.

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New legislation (SB 361) requires the chancellor's office to begin an accountability system that addresses specific noncredit courses and their students. The legislation specifies that the new reporting and analysis fall within the ARCC framework. Further research into the wage gain measure in the ARCC report will probably occur, resources permitting.

A substantial amount of work lies in potential analyses of ARCC data to see how different demographic groups fared. However, due to limited staff resources for research and the very tight schedule for the ARCC report, these important analyses do not seem feasible in the foreseeable future. The prospect of very austere budgets for state offices in coming years may mean that such research will not happen for quite some time, if at all.

### Lessons Learned

California's experience in implementing ARCC may help other states that have plans to create or revise an accountability system for their own community college systems. Considering ARCC as a case study, albeit with some unique environmental factors in play, administrators can draw some useful conclusions. One is that a state must have a relatively well developed standard database from which to calculate performance indicators. It also will be helpful if that database enables analysts to level the playing field by producing between-college comparisons of performance that account for or adjust for environmental factors that college administrators cannot control. Without any adjustment for environmental fac-

tors, the specter of unfair evaluations will cause college officials to oppose an accountability plan.

A second conclusion involves the kind of accountability evaluation that state officials may strive to obtain. While a comparison of a college's own performance for a series of years can give insight, oversight bodies tend to prefer some kind of between-college comparison. The ARCC experience indicates that a peer grouping approach may suffice in this respect. The peer grouping approach succeeds in identifying suspect performances by specific colleges while avoiding oversimplified rankings of college performance. ARCC also demonstrates that the application of statistical tools such as regression and cluster analysis, despite their technical nature, can gain wide acceptance among nontechnical audiences.

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“walks the talk” by demonstrating the systematic approach of data collection, reflection, and improvement in a targeted student learning outcome area—in this case, student engagement.

Second, make use of internal talent. Several academic departments may have accrediting bodies in their disciplines that impose stringent assessment requirements. Individual faculty who coordinate the as-

## Considerations in Setting Up the College Assessment Committee

Our CAC is a relatively large committee of at least ten members. Over half are faculty (at least two from each of our three divisions), and the rest are key administrators who represent areas for which assessment is particularly important—for example, student development, planning

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essment efforts for these departments could serve on the CAC and provide outstanding input in that role. In addition, their expertise could be tapped to conduct some of the aforementioned workshops and presentations and to meet with departmental assessment representatives to assist, support, and suggest improvements to assessment plans. Periodically, the efforts of these departments should be featured in the context of faculty meetings and workshops. A critical qualifier must be noted here. These models should never be presented alone, particularly early in the effort to promote assessment. They may be overwhelming to the faculty members who are novices in assessment. Early efforts and assessment plans at intermediate stages should complement the more advanced models.

and research, academic affairs. Initially, I was not happy about the size of the committee, but two benefits came from having more members. First, the bigger the committee, the more members we could convert to be ambassadors of assessment. Second, a large committee provided a diversity of viewpoints that helped us to anticipate the nature of the resistance we would encounter, allowing us to address the resistance proactively. For example, some benefits yielded by a larger group of eyes included determination of trends in data to emphasize so that faculty would not drown in an enormous sea of figures. We were able to construct strategies for making the request for assessment plans while being sensitive to workload demands. In addition, we learned to pack-

age our feedback on assessment plans so as to emphasize constructive improvements rather than trivial nitpicking. Still, coordinating meetings with a large group is challenging.

With plenty of work to get done, I chose to divide and conquer. I was able to structure three CAC subgroups to work on specific initiatives: the student engagement assessment effort, departmental assessment, and assessment within the general education curriculum. Although it meant more meetings for the chair, this was offset by efficiency. Meetings were very focused because people were grouped as specialists. Delegation of tasks was easier because members had taken ownership of specific projects. When each subgroup had reached a point in their tasks where there was a product for review by the whole committee, this was easily accomplished via e-mail with specific deadlines for feedback.

Integrating assessment into the daily life of the campus community requires clear and direct leadership. Leadership at Moravian College started with the president and continued with the faculty leadership on the CAC. The CAC still serves to educate faculty about assessment and to provide feedback on departmental plans. ■

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A third conclusion concerns the administrative mechanism by which to implement an accountability plan. The implementation of ARCC probably owes much of its success to the placement of responsibility in the hands of the vice-chancellor who controlled the data system and the research function. The most critical resources that accountability systems demand center on data and the capacity for data analysis. Placement of the

workload wholly within one administrative division or large unit allows a statewide office to make an intense, unified effort to achieve a complex change like a new accountability system. ■

### Reference

[www.cccco.edu/systemoffice/divisions/techresearchinfo/researchandplanning/ARCC.tabid/292/default.aspx](http://www.cccco.edu/systemoffice/divisions/techresearchinfo/researchandplanning/ARCC.tabid/292/default.aspx).

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